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College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What To Do About It

Richard Kadison, M.D. and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo

A Review Essay by Michael Lastoria, Ed.D.

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Timely, thoughtful, and well-organized ... are adjectives that came to mind after having read *College of the Overwhelmed*. Kadison and DiGeronimo argue there is a mental health crisis affecting college students; specifically the authors cite the “extraordinary increase in serious mental illness on college campuses today.”

The book is timely given that 81% of college and university counseling center directors report seeing more students with serious psychological problems than were seen five years ago, and 63% report a growing demand for services without an appropriate increase in resources (National Survey of Counseling Center Directors, 2003). Furthermore suicide is the second leading cause of death (after accidents) among college students, and accounts for more deaths than all other student medical illnesses combined. Finally, the recent suicides at NYU and the Shin family’s landmark \$27 million lawsuit against MIT alleging negligence in the care of their daughter, Elizabeth, have brought the mental health problems of college students to public attention.

In light of this crisis the authors ask, how much responsibility do schools have for the emotional health of their students. Realizing that our campuses are not residential treatment centers for students with unstable mental health, the authors argue that proponents opposing funding for strengthening mental health services on our campuses “do not fully understand the ramifications of *not* helping these students. The mental health crisis on campus affects far more than just the mental health counselors; it affects the individual students, the student body in general, and the entire institution.” (p.156)

Kadison and DiGeronimo’s work is thoughtful. In large measure they have done their homework. They rely heavily upon survey data, scholarly journals, and popular media when appropriate, these sources being cited frequently when making their arguments. The lead author, Kadison, serves as the Chief of Mental Health Service at Harvard University and brings a wealth of experience to this work. He speaks with a compelling, yet gentle, authority at a time when leadership is badly needed to address the growing concern of providing adequate mental health services to the students at our institutions.

Addressed primarily to parents of prospectives and current college students, the book is also a useful resource for student life professionals. It is divided into two parts. The first part (chapters 1-4) address the problem: *Why are some kids so unhappy at college?* Part one is an easy to read primer, especially for parents and new professional staff.

The first chapter, *Normal Developmental Issues*, discusses identity, relationships and sexuality, and the interpersonal world of the college student. These issues, while common, mark a period of transition for students, many leaving home for the first time ... and change equates to stress at any age. Chapter 2, *Pressure and Competition*, cites additional

sources of stress for today's student: the pressure to achieve academically while being socially popular, the expectation of many parents for continued close communication ("the cell phone as eternal umbilicus," Marano, 2004), and conformity to parent's wishes in career choice. Minority and international students face even greater challenges given the racial and cultural problems often encountered on predominantly white campuses (insert most Christian college campuses). The authors argue that, while not entirely new, these stressors are being experienced by students in greater measure as our culture of high expectations continues to raise the bar for success and achievement. The inevitable fallout is a classic situation for "early burnout."

Not mentioned, however, is a point made by several respected scholars in the November/December 2004 issue of *Psychology Today*. The article titled *A Nation of Wimps* (Marano, 2004) cites the opinions of child psychologists David Elkind, Jerome Kagan, and historian Peter Stearns, author of *Anxious Parenting: A History of Modern Childrearing in America*. Marano believes that as parents go to great lengths to take the bumps out of life for their children, the net effect is making our kids *more* fragile and, ironically, may be one reason that college students are breaking down in record numbers. Parental hyperconcern, geared more toward academic achievement and social success rather than child development, is backfiring. Add to this mix grade inflation and the "dumbing down" of the curriculum, many institutions' response to the less than adequate academic preparation of today's student, and the picture becomes more complicated. While not negating the authors' point, these omitted elements ought to be added to the discussion. In a few cases cited I found myself wondering about the wimp factor (e.g., "postgraduate crisis" syndrome, p.72).

Chapter 3, *Financial Worries and Social Fears*, discusses the rising costs of a college education and the increase in crimes on today's campuses (robberies, fistfights, assaults, and rapes). No one doubts that the increased costs of a college education add to student stress, even when parents can afford the higher price tag. Facts are cited to support this claim. But "facts" can be chosen to make an argument more convincing and a problem more sensational. The fact that between 1981 and 1994, the cost of education increased 153 percent at public universities and over 200 percent at private universities (p. 65) is accurate in raw data form. But this fact doesn't differentiate the "sticker price" of education from the *net cost* to a family. The latter adds financial aid dollars that reduce the total cost to families. Data from the 2004 College Board Trends in Student Aid shows that when comparing the price vs. net cost of for 2003-04 compared to 1984-85, the average sticker price increase was 75%, but the net cost increase (the burden to a family) was 38%. Again, this does not negate the point of higher costs translating to more student stress, but may reduce the stress to parents when reading chapter three.

Chapter 4, *Crisis on Campus* is the longest chapter in the book and lists the most common forms of mental health problems experienced by students today. Depression, sleep disorders, substance abuse, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, sexual addiction/promiscuity, and suicide are all discussed. The authors consider these common problem behaviors as "functional" in that they serve a purpose, and are usually substitutes for prior coping mechanisms that no longer work. In large measure each of these symptoms is a response to students feeling emotionally disconnected and out of control. The chapter is well organized and offers much needed information to parents. It is also valuable to college administrators and staff who need to know what problems students have, with what frequency, and how campus mental health services are becoming hard pressed to serve these students in need.

Two minor critiques of this section are in the form of omission. In discussing eating disorders the authors define criteria for diagnosis using a check list for anorexia, bulimia, and binge eating. However, not mentioned are the "subclinical" forms of these problems which constitute an even greater problem on our campuses. The number of students, particularly females, who suffer from *some* of the symptoms of an eating disorder, while not meeting the standard for "full diagnosis" is epidemic. Accepting subclinical estimates of female students on our campus with "disordered eating" more accurately describes the scope of the problem. In addition, parents told by their daughter that "there's no problem, because I don't meet the criteria," need to know that there may still be a very real problem. Secondly, while the section on student suicide accurately reports the severity of the problem, it would have been helpful to mention that suicide among college students appears less frequent than among an age-matched non-student population (7.5/100,000 vs. 15/100,000, Silverman, 1997, in ASFP Screening Project, October 2004). While agreeing with the authors that student suicide needs to be addressed more carefully, it appears that the college environment and its stressors are one of many culprits.

Part II, *The Solution* (chapters 5-7), contains chapters written to colleges (administrators and counseling center directors), parents, and students. I found it refreshing that the authors devote a significant portion of the book to a solution. Works of this nature often devote the major effort to describing the problem accompanied by a brief "summary and suggestions" chapter at the end.

Chapter 5, addressed to college personnel, should be required reading for key administrators and counseling center staff. It serves as a good reminder of the multifaceted nature of the counseling center's mission, including counseling, education, and prevention. Appendix C contains a useful list of questions for administrators and directors to use in assessing their own mental health services.

Chapter 6, addressed to parents, encourages the development of strong communication skills emphasizing listening and talking without lecturing, dictating, or criticizing. There is a symptoms checklist for the problems mentioned in chapter 4, and a guide for parent's use when communicating a concern with college personnel about their son or daughter. Also listed are questions for parents to ask college administrators that will help them assess the quality of campus mental health services. Student personnel professionals may find themselves quizzed more frequently as parents and students shop around for the college with the best fit ... the quality of mental health services will now be appearing on the "check it out" list.

Chapter 7, addressed to students, will not likely be read by students unless a parent says "I'd like you to read this and then I'd like to hear what you think about it." Nevertheless, the information is sound, practical, and helpful to students and to those in student activities responsible for generating prevention programming. Finally, the author includes four appendices containing helpful resources for follow-up information. Appendix B is a wonderful primer on psychotropic medication.

College of the Overwhelmed is a superb guide for parents, an important resource for college personnel, and a potential help for students. The authors' point is clear. Students today are reporting more mental health problems than in the past. Parents are becoming more concerned. Colleges will be held more accountable to meet this growing demand for the mental health care of students. And it is important that we do so.